The Fourth Church Pulpit

A Lenten Series: Love to the Loveless
That They Might Lovely Be

A MAN WHO WAS LOST
IN THE MIDDLE OF LIFE

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FOURTH
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Scriptures: I Corinthians 13:1-7 John 3:1-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."
John 3:16 (NRSV)

There is, as you know, no shortage of theories about what ails us. Depending on who you ask, the human condition may be described as depressed, oppressed, obsessed, repressed, over-sexed, under-sexed, driven, anxious, sinful. Sometimes it seems that the most consistent thing you can say about us is that very few of us are content, almost all of us are not satisfied with life, are hungry for more, and if we have one fear it is that we are missing something, that life is trickling away, like sand running through our fingers.

There's a wonderful character in Albert Camus' classic, *The Fall*, who spends his life sitting at a bar in Amsterdam observing life happen and commenting on it. One time he says —

> "I never cross a bridge at night . . . suppose, after all, that someone should jump into the water. One of two things — either you do likewise to fish him out, and in cold weather you run a great risk! Or you forsake him there and suppressed dives sometimes leave one strangely aching." [See *Homiletics,* January-March, 1993]

The man's life consists of neutral observation and intentional uninvolvement. He is not a bad man. He simply doesn't want to risk his health or his life nor does he wish to risk a bad conscience should he fail to respond to the need of another human being. So he remains in the bar, observing and drinking . . . and, Jesus of Nazareth would say — perishing.

He reminds me of one of my favorite characters in the Bible. As a matter of fact, Nicodemus is one of the ›st characters in all of literature, I think. I've always liked him. He's the kind of man many of us were brought up to emulate and to become. He is successful and influential, a member of a select group of seventy men who, under the leadership of the High Priest, served as the government, legislature and judiciary, of Israel under Roman occupation, the Sanhedrin it is called. This is a good man, a man for whom words like noblesse, oblige, duty, responsibility, generosity, were important. I have always seen Nicodemus in Brooks Brothers' pin stripes, white shirt (never blue), wing tip shoes, the *Wall Street Journal* folded under his arm, walking briskly up Michigan Avenue from his office to a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Presbyterian Church. I like him a lot.

a thinker/reader - insomnic

I like him because there is a substantial human being in that classic facade, as is often the case. And there is more even than meets the eye. He's a reader, keeps three or four books going all the time, some of them surprising. He reads what the *New York Times* Review of Books tells him he ought to read; but he's also rediscovering poetry . . . struggling through T. S. Eliot; and he's read a little theology, of all things; and now and then when he can't sleep, an irritatingly frequent occasion recently which his internist assures him is common for men his age, he has picked up the Bible. In those sleepless periods, always at night, of course, he finds himself thinking about things and asking questions which he assumed he had resolved thirty-five years ago: "What's it all about? What's it all mean? What's going to happen to me?"

I see Nicodemus as a metaphor for what happens to us midway through life. He was secure, his retirement package was in place and dependable. But the truth — which he found himself pondering during the sleepless periods at night - was that it had been a long time since he had cared passionately about anything. Oh, he cared about his golf handicap, but it had been a long time since an idea, a cause, a need, had stirred him and fully ıgaged his imagination and made his heart beat faster and his breath quicker. The truth is he felt life slipping away and that made him very sad.

And so one night, after dark, when the city was quiet and he would not be seen, he went to the house where there was a man staying whose ideas and character and growing reputation intrigued him. I like this best about him. He takes a chance. He risks his reputation and influence by going to see the young Rabbi from Nazareth, even if it is after dark.

The Bible is about people like that. The Bible does not present theological propositions so much as it tells the stories of people who sound strikingly familiar. The Bible really isn't about religion. It's about people and their needs, their eccentricities, their successes and failures, their weaknesses and their strengths, their humanness. And it's about God and God's love and the way God's love and the humanity of those strikingly familiar people intersect in time and space, and in imagination, in Jesus of Nazareth who we call Christ.

As a theme this Lenten season, I am using a phrase written by a poet in the 17th century, Samuel Crossman, which, set to music, is in one of the most beautiful hymns in our new *Presbyterian Hymnal:*

> "Love to the loveless shown
> That they might lovely be."

I have chosen people for whom that happened. Touched by love in their encounter with Jesus, they were saved, rescued from a particular kind of perishing or "lostness." Each was found and recreated by that love. Each, in a unique way, became lovely. The woman who everyone knew was a prostitute and embarrassed a respectable and gracious dinner host by interrupting the meal, washing Jesus feet, pouring perfume over them... The blind man, tiresome with his incessant begging . . . The woman who had to go to the well for water in the heat of the day because she was an outcast . . . . Lazarus who died too soon. . . . And today, Nicodemus, in his Brooks Brothers' pin-stripes, walking down Michigan Avenue with such purposefulness, self-direction, and inside, in his soul, lost, wandering about, perishing, in a way.

One of the things I like about him is his directness, his almost naive innocence when it comes to nuance, subtlety. He's used to charts and graphs, profit and loss statements, bottom lines. He's a natural literalist: "How can this be?" he asks the Rabbi when he hears about the need to be born "again" — or "from above." Frederick Buechner has a little good natured fun with Nicodemus' literalist mentality.

> ". . . just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off when you were pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb — when it was all he could do to enter a taxi without the driver's coming around to give him a shove from behind?" [*Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who,* p. 122]

Did you notice how Jesus has to lead Nicodemus away from his fundamentalism? Nicodemus asks how being born again is possible and Jesus says, in effect, "I don't mean that literally, Nicodemus! It's a figure of speech. You must be born of God's spirit. The very breath of God which creates all life, which animates and energizes all life . . . must be in you."

And then an interesting thing happens. It is not clear whether Jesus goes on talking or whether the author takes over: stops describing and starts preaching, although that's what it feels like — like someone interjecting, "Oh, by the way, what this conversation is really about is this: 'For God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.'"

In any event, we leave Nicodemus for the moment, at least. Beginning with the mundane realities of a late middle-aged, successful, respected community leader, suffering mild insomnia, wondering what life is all about, the Fourth Gospel now launches into deep water, theologically, in the process giving us one of the most memorable lines anybody ever wrote — the first words of the Bible many of us remember, the first we had to

memorize, yet lines so inclusive and sweeping in their simplicity that Martin Luther called this single sentence the "Gospel in miniature."

God so loves the world . . . God loves the world. God loves the world and everything in it. The world — matter — life — the incredibly intricate ecosystem, the expanding universe: all that is reflects the heart and mind and intent of God. God loves all of it. And then bringing the singularity of Nicodemus back into focus — this individual life, this person — God loves so much that he gave a son.

There is a sense in which the history of Christianity is the story of human inability to believe that. We qualify it, add conditions to it, tie strings to it, argue with it and finally reject it. "Can't be true," we say, in effect. "God can't love all of it: maybe God loves part of it . . . in fact our part, the good part, the good old Western Civilization part, the Christian part, or the Euro-American part, or the Presbyterian part, but not all of it."

And sometimes we seem to say "God really doesn't love the world . . . likes it a lot maybe, offers to love it if it would simply start acting better and show that it deserves God's love." And sometimes we have been persuaded that God not only doesn't love the world, but rather dislikes it; prefers another world that exists beyond time and space to this one, with all its messiness and tragedy and mortality. And the really sad thing is that when we say those things or think like that, what we are actually saying is that it is inconceivable to me that God loves me so much that he gave his only son — for me — that I should not perish — but have life everlasting.

Vanderbilt Professor, Sallie McFague, believes that we ought just to accept the simplicity of it and interpret it, not philosophically, but through the only thing we know for sure about love, namely our own experience of it. The world, she says, is God's beloved. God is the world's lover. God desires the world, hungers for the world, aches for the world, delights in the world.

A generation ago the great Karl Barth, who could turn out twelve volumes of dogmatic theology, wrote with elegant simplicity, "God is means God loves."

If you believe that, it changes everything. I think it was E. B. White who said once that the good thing about having a religion is that at least you know what to do when you get up in the morning. If you believe God loves the world, that the world is God's beloved, then the whole matter of ecological abuse, oil spills, and disappearing species, and a hole in the ozone layer is not only evidence of the most monumental stupidity in human history — which is how Lewis Thomas describes our addiction to fossil fuels — but a matter of high and serious morality — certainly as important to God, as who is doing what with whom sexually.

And if God loves the world — then there is a sense in which every single human life is beloved. And therefore it is not simply imprudent and terribly short sighted to stand by and observe a generation of urban children wasting away, literally perishing, it is a matter of high morality.

But the biggest difference of all and perhaps basic to the social and political dimensions is the personal — God loves you so much. . . .

It is what we need more than anything else. In a widely read new book Thomas More, a psychotherapist, writes:

> "Our high expectation of love is that it will somehow make life complete . . .
> Love seems to promise that life's gaping wounds will close up and heal."
> [*Care of the Soul*, p. 78]

You have read, as I have, the laboratory evidence that love is essential to life. We know now that the healthiest thing that can happen to a human infant is the physical contact with a human body, the love of a mother and father; that the only thing we can think of to do for newborn infants withdrawing from the cocaine addiction passed into their bodies by their mothers is to cradle them and rock them and stroke them and love them. We know now that love does wonderful things for your internal chemical system, that people in love do feel better, and if you have ever been in mortal danger, if you have been critically ill, or undergone major surgery, you know how important it is to be loved and cared about, to know that someone is there for you and with you.

Professor McFague teaches that love imparts value. The essence of being loved by someone else, she says, is being valued. Eros, at its best says not only you are desirable, you are valuable, precious, cherished, wanted.

Without that, without some indication of our value, there is a sense in which we perish. If you don't know you have value because no one ever told you — you will spend your life trying to establish your value. And if your have been told, by life, that you have no value, ~~that you are valueless~~, that you do not matter, you know already what it means to be perishing.

(Clarence here)

There are many ways people conclude that they ~~have no value~~ and therefore many ways to perish.

We know now that abused children have no sense of personal worth or value and carry scars all their lives . . . and must deal with it over and over again.

We know that abused women come to the same conclusion.

We know that parents whose high demands and expectations are unrealistic often leave behind children who become men and women who are never satisfied with their own achievements, are never really able to love and rejoice in life, and live with a permanent sense of incompleteness.

We know that unemployment can become an assault on our personal sense of value, that loss of a job can result in loss of self-esteem and then deep and debilitating depression. We know that it happens a lot in mid-life when the children are gone and the mountains are scaled . . . when the fires are banked.

And we know that when poverty and systemic racism exist together the result is an entire subculture in captivity to valuelessness. If you lived in public housing, and every day of your life walked down the five flights of stairs, dark, filthy, reeking of urine, and out on to the glass-strewn sidewalk, and if you lifted your head and looked at the world of the Chicago Housing Authority around you — you would conclude that anyone who lived here, like this, cannot be worth anything. And so valuelessness becomes a tragically self-fulfilling prophecy — children murder children; and little Natasha, whose last name is the same as mine and so caught my eye, four years old, dies in Cook County hospital last Tuesday because she had been beaten and abused, alone, her father absent, her mother in jail, her mother's boy friend on trial.

(or here)

So there are social and ethical and political meanings to this Gospel in miniature. If God so loves this world then we who live in this world and for this moment in time are its resident managers, and we have work to do. We have work to do.

But beneath that is the personal dimension and it is true that it begins here in our hearts or it does not begin at all; that it is futile for the preacher to urge social action because God so loves the world, until we understand and acknowledge that we — you and I — are part of the world, and objects, therefore, of God's love: that we are the ones God so loves.

There are no more beautiful words in the world than "I love you." There is no more beautiful sound than the voice of your spouse, your lover, your children, your grandchildren, your friend saying "You are valuable to me. You are cherished. I love you." What we Christians believe is really very simple. It is that in Jesus Christ God has called us by name — and said those most beautiful words . . . "I love you."

It can rescue you from wandering through life, lost. It can save you from perishing. Those words can bring you life eternal.

He came at night to see Jesus, this admirable man who is so familiar to us — he might even be you and me. He came at night and heard about a God who doesn't judge and condemn the world, doesn't wait in splendid heavenly isolation for men and women to become good, but a God who loves so much that he gives a son — and in that giving, that supreme act of love, offers life — full, joyful, complete, healed, everlasting.

He is mentioned two more times, Nicodemus is. Some time later the Sanhedrin is discussing how to deal with Jesus and opposition to him is growing and some want to arrest and do away with him. Nicodemus, the Fourth Gospel reports, offers a mild defense: "Let him alone," he says. And I sense it was an act of courage, an affirmation of his own life.

I like to think his life, touched by love, began anew in his middle-age: and he cared more, and loved his family more, and loved life more, and loved himself more, and laughed a lot more, because in Jesus the Christ he heard the voice of God say "I love you" and he, even Nicodemus, became lovely.

It doesn't say that but it must be true because at the very end of the story Nicodemus does something strong and brave and very lovely. On the day Jesus died Nicodemus, along with his friend Joseph, walks into the office of Pontius Pilate and asks for the body. He and Joseph carry it away for burial. And I think he has tears in his eyes but joy in his heart and this time it is not darkness but the bright light of day and he has never been more alive in his life.